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ABSTRACT

To give Congress the information it needs to make informed decisions about initiatives aimed at school dropouts, the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) has published a two-phase report: Phase 1, "School Dropouts: The Extent and Name of the Problem" (see ED 274 756), completed in 1986, provides information on the dropout rate, characteristics of dropouts and potential dropouts, and the employment implications of dropping out of school; and Phase 2, "School Dropouts: Survey of Local Programs" (see ED 288 929), published in 1987, provides the results of a survey of local school officials about their dropout programs and identifies what local program administrators view as the obstacles to, and characteristics of, effective programs. This report includes descriptions of some of the 20 programs described in Phase 2 of the GAO report and, though it concluded that no single model for serving potential dropouts could be found, common elements of what appear to be effective programs are identified as follows: (1) multiple services offered to serve multiple needs; (2) some type of basic education, counseling, and other support services; (3) general educational development (GED) preparation for youth who have already dropped out of school; and (4) a caring and committed staff, secure learning environment, personalized instruction, low student-teacher ratio, and program flexibility. An agenda for school boards to consider is proposed along with a list of policies that should be reviewed in addressing the dropout problem. (MLF)

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Updating SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES

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What works for school dropouts?

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The news is good. SAT scores are on the rise. Students are studying more math, science, and foreign language. Academic standards are being raised on all fronts.

But *all* the news is not good. For too many students, dropping out of school persists as an attractive alternative to formal education.

Federal initiatives

The problem is not new. Nor has it been ignored in the past. Both the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Labor have supported programs aimed at reducing the number of dropouts. But neither has collected data to identify "what works."

Legislation currently under consideration by Congress would authorize competitive funds for local programs to prevent potential dropouts from leaving school and to attract back to school those who have dropped out. Also targeted in the legislation is development of systems for collecting and using information on dropouts.

According to Ed Kealy of the National School Boards Association federal relations office, there is a "clear likelihood" that Congress will appropriate 50 million dollars beginning next year toward dropout prevention and recovery demonstration programs. Now is a good time for school systems to consider what they would do to compete for those funds.

Background

To give Congress the information it needs to make informed decisions about initiatives aimed at school dropouts, the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) has published a two-phase report. Phase 1, *School Dropouts: The Extent and Nature of the Problem*, which was completed in June 1986, provided critical information on the dropout rate, characteristics of dropouts and potential dropouts, the employment implications of dropping out of school, and the economic implications for society. The report concluded that there was inadequate knowledge of successful specific programs.

The Phase 2 report, *School Dropouts: Survey of Local Programs*, was published in July 1987. It provides the results of a survey of local school officials about their dropout programs and identifies what local program administrators view as the obstacles to and characteristics of effective programs.

Program sampler

In surveying local districts about programs aimed at dropouts or students at risk of dropping out of school, the GAO asked about:

- funding sources
- characteristics of those served
- program objectives and methods
- factors associated with effective programs
- barriers to program effectiveness and strategies for overcoming them.

The report includes descriptions of some 20 programs. Some target both dropouts and potential dropouts (approximately 31 percent); others target either dropouts (22 percent) or potential dropouts (47 percent).

Alternative school

The Des Moines Alternative High School is one program that targets students, mostly white and all from urban areas, who have already left school. Of the 480 students enrolled in the program during 1985-86, 80 percent were behind in grade level and 20 percent were pregnant or already were parents.

The alternative school offers a full curriculum, enabling students to complete requirements for a high school diploma. Learning is individually paced in small classes; students may enroll at any time during the school year. In addition, students can receive up to two high school credits when they enroll in a vocational internship program in which they receive training at an employment site. Among the other services offered are personal and employment counseling, day care services for students with children, and referral to community services when necessary.

Prevention

Project SUCCESS in Prince Georges County, Md., is aimed at potential dropouts, primarily ninth graders. Improving academic performance, attendance, and attitudes toward school are the program's objectives. Services include:

- Small classes of no more than 20 students with instruction individualized and based on an interdisciplinary approach;
- Enrichment activities, such as field trips;
- Supplemental computer-assisted instruction;
- Tutorial assistance, counseling, and attendance monitoring;
- Regular communication with parents about student progress;
- Incentive awards;
- Daily staff meetings focused on individual student progress.

As a substitute for suspension from school, students requiring discipline

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are assigned to "an intensive care unit" where they are closely monitored while doing extensive amounts of work.

Comprehensive effort

In Dalton County, Ga., the Stay-In-School Task Force targets dropouts, potential dropouts, and parents. Supported by the community, local industry, and a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission, the task force has worked to overcome a local obstacle to the completion of high school: readily available employment for high school dropouts.

The task force conducted a public awareness program to publicize the community's dropout problem—reportedly the highest in Georgia. In addition, its "Education is Essential" Committee devised an agreement for employers to sign. The agreement pledged employers to:

- encourage job applicants under 19 to continue their education (priority in hiring given to high school graduates);
- hire high school students as part-time employees and encourage them to attend school and maintain their grades;
- promote education as important to their employees;
- give special recognition to employees who achieve a GED and to children of employees who complete high school;
- participate in an ongoing program to encourage students to complete their education.

By March 1987, 207 businesses (approximately two-thirds of local employers) had signed the agreement.

In addition, the Dalton County task force has focused on the schools by seeking to develop programs that identify potential dropouts and provide dropout prevention services, such as alternative school programs. And through its Adult Basic Education Committee, the task force is trying to improve the education of adults, including basic literacy, as well as the educational environment of children.

Success factors

While the GAO study found little in the way of program evaluation to substantiate the effectiveness of existing programs, it did elicit from program officials those factors that seemingly are helpful. First, cited by more than 90 percent of the administrators, is the need for a caring and committed staff and a nonthreatening classroom environment. Approximately 75 percent cited low student-teacher ratio, individualized instruction, and program flexibility (including curriculum and school hours) as beneficial. Other factors that influence program effectiveness are links with social service agencies and parental involvement.

The GAO report recognizes that these factors also are found in research. The lack of program evaluations and specific evidence, however, limits the usefulness of the information for identifying effective approaches to reducing the numbers of dropouts.

Barriers

Other factors serve as barriers to the success of dropout prevention and recovery programs. Among them are:

- troubled home environment;
- apathetic parents;
- budgetary constraints;
- inadequate follow-up services.

Some administrators surveyed also emphasized the importance of intervening earlier—during the preteenage years. By the time students reach high school, they already are beset by failure and behavior problems.

Tailor services

The GAO study also looked at programs that are tailored to specific needs. For example, young women frequently drop out of school due to pregnancy or parenthood. They are less often than other dropouts behind in grade level; they also less often have a history of behavior, truancy, or excessive absence problems.

What they do face are the daily pressures of pregnancy or parenthood. Programs serving them, therefore, address those pressures by providing prenatal guidance and parenting support. Links to social service providers also are evident in these programs.

In addition, more than 75 percent of these specialized programs offer child care assistance. A problem arises, however, when inadequate and/or inaccessible child care is available in the community. Some programs offer on-site child care which enables the schools to monitor the young mothers' parenting skills as well as to provide a healthy environment for the babies and provide counseling to reduce repeat pregnancies. An increasing number of these specialized programs are providing job skills training.

Reasons for dropping out

To address the dropout problem, it is important to know why youngsters consider leaving school. According to the *High School and Beyond* survey (an ongoing U.S. Department of Education-sponsored survey of a group of students who were sophomores and seniors in 1980), the primary reasons include:

- Poor grades (69 percent)
- "School was not for me" (66 percent)
- Inability to get along with teachers (31 percent)
- Expulsion or suspension (18 percent)
- Marriage or plans for marriage (38 percent)
- Pregnancy (23 percent)
- Employment opportunity (38 percent).

The GAO study revealed a similar picture. Also similar to other national studies is the GAO data that show 54 percent of the youngsters served in dropout prevention and recovery programs as being young men and more than 75 percent as coming from families of low socioeconomic status.

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Specialized services also are being targeted to Hispanic students. The dropout rate is higher for Hispanics than for other ethnic/racial groups who are affected by three strong predictors of dropping out: low socioeconomic status; limited English language skills; academic failure.

The GAO survey revealed, not surprisingly, that English as a second language was emphasized in programs in which Hispanic youth constituted the majority. They also showed a higher emphasis on increasing parental involvement and finding part-time jobs for students; more often, these youngsters are in need of employment income.

Lessons to learn

The GAO study concluded that no single model for serving potential dropouts or recovering those who already had dropped out could be identified. Programs were too diverse and there was a lack of definitive data for measuring effectiveness. Nevetheless, the report does identify the elements of what appear to be effective programs. These include:

- multiple services offered to serve multiple needs;
- some type of basic education, counseling, and other support services;
- GED preparation for youth who have already dropped out of school;
- a caring and committed staff, secure learning environment, personalized instruction, low student-teacher ratio, and program flexibility.

Dropout prevention clearinghouse

Figuring out "what works" in dropout prevention may receive a helping hand from the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University.

The goal of the center, which will serve as a national resource base for dropout prevention efforts, is to support efforts by consolidating, evaluating, and disseminating knowledge as well as coordinating future research and development initiatives. The center's program includes:

- a clearinghouse for information on dropouts;
- a directory of key contact persons;
- sponsorship and support of coordinated research;
- publications.

For more information, contact: National Dropout Prevention Center, Clemson University, Clemson, S.C. 29634-0725 (803/656-2599).

Set agenda

School boards, superintendents, and local school staff can provide leadership in addressing the dropout problem. To focus on the problem locally, some actions to consider are:

- identify the scope of the dropout problem in your community including dropout rate and whether it is increasing or decreasing, numbers of students involved, and characteristics of students who have dropped out;
- review what efforts already are in place to identify potential dropouts and to intervene on their behalf;
- follow up on what happens to students in your community who drop out of school;
- discuss the noneducational service needs of at-risk students with community agencies that could play a role in meeting those needs;
- involve the business community in identifying the implications of dropouts on the local economy as well as training and employment opportunities for youth;
- seek assistance from parent organizations in promoting parent involvement in schools and providing programs on effective parenting;
- collaborate with organizations representing minorities to identify and develop educational programs and services aimed at preventing school dropouts.

In addition, school boards should review their policies that relate to the dropout problem. These include:

- staffing ratios for teachers and counselors;
- promotion/retention policies;
- relations with community organizations and local governmental authorities;
- student welfare policies that address student health, psychological, and social services;
- programs for pregnant and married students;
- vocational/job training programs;
- adult education programs, including GED preparation;
- remediation and English as a second language programs;
- attendance recordkeeping.

Also, become familiar with what your state board of education and state department of education are doing or could do to prevent and recover dropouts. ■

To obtain GAO report

The GAO report, *School Dropouts: Survey of Local Programs*, is available at no cost by writing to: U.S. General Accounting Office, P.O. Box 6015, Gaithersburg, Md. 20877. Refer to Document number HRD-87-108.

The earlier the better

In Muscatine, Iowa, kindergarteners—the Class of 1999—are setting their sights on high school graduation. Last June, Muscatine's Project Encouragement gave the district's nearly 500 kindergarteners a clear vision of what they had to look forward to by inviting high school valedictorians, in full graduation regalia, to visit all kindergarten classes. As described in the Iowa Association of School Boards' *Dialogue* (Sept.-Oct. 1987), they "crowded around the seniors to touch the tassles, medals, and diplomas."

Later, gathered in an auditorium along with parents and community leaders, the six-year-olds heard words of encouragement from Barbara Bush, wife of the vice president. "Anticipatory diplomas" were presented to each kindergartener in the district. The superintendent, Thomas Wirtz, closed the ceremony with a pledge of support and encouragement for the youngsters to graduate from high school. Follow-up activities planned include a "buddy" pledge through which parents will promise to encourage a youngster to continue his or her studies through high school.

For more information on Project Encouragement, contact: Lorri Nelson or Janyce Myers, Muscatine Community School District, 1403 Park Ave., Muscatine, Iowa 52761 (319/263-7223).

Much of the material in this article is drawn from the U.S. General Accounting Office report "School Dropouts: Survey of Local Programs."